

Collaborative Partnerships and School Change: Evaluating Project SOBEIT

Candace H. Lacey, Ph.D.

Nova Southeastern University

Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the
American Educational Research Association

San Francisco, CA

April, 2006

Introduction

The focus of Project SOBEIT is “...was create a continuum of services within a system of care to provide students and their families with enhanced comprehensive educational, mental health, social service, law enforcements and juvenile justice services that promote healthy childhood development and prevent violence and alcohol and other drug abuse” (Prevention Center, 2002). The project was framed within a comprehensive plan required by the grantors which included six elements: (1) safe school environment, (2) alcohol and other drug and violence prevention and early intervention programs, (3) school and community mental health preventive and treatment intervention services, (4) early childhood psychosocial and emotional development programs, (5) educational reform, and (6) safe school policies. Three questions were developed to guide the evaluation and subsequent data collection. Findings are reported via the evaluative questions and theoretical framework.

Evaluation Methodology

In order to answer the questions related to the project goals and assess outcomes related to student growth, a mixed method research design was developed using parallel or simultaneous methodologies (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). This design was selected because it offered the most powerful evaluation of the project, addressing concerns about validity and reliability and thus the transferability of the findings to other settings.

Additionally, a theoretical framework was selected to guide the evaluation of the project. It provided a structure for thinking about data and a basis for generalizing out qualitative findings (Seale, 1999). The framework selected was a context, process, outcomes, sustainability model.

Four participant categories were involved in this evaluation: (1) the middle and high schools in which the program was implemented, (2) the principals of these schools (3) project staff which included a grant coordinator/manager who was housed at the district office, a program specialists who was housed at an area middle school, and the program facilitators who were housed at project targeted middle and high schools, and (5) community partners.

Multiple sources of data were collected for this evaluation these included demographic data on the schools, the SBT Cultural Assessment Survey, the Collaboration Scale, the Collaboration Checklist, the Readiness for Change Audit, the School Based Team Capacity Assessment, Principal Interviews, Facilitator Interviews and Focus Groups, project documents and reports, and Mean Developmental Scale Scores

Findings

At the end of the first year of full implementation, tremendous progress has been made toward successfully meeting the objectives and activities outlined in Goal 1. Positions have been filled and collaborative partnerships are being formed. The Project Coordinator continues to focus on providing the direction for these partnerships. It will be through her leadership and willingness to communicate with the other members of the project staff that these collaborations will continue to flourish.

Goal 2 addresses the issues of academic achievement, pro-social behavior, and alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use. Baseline and year one data have been collected to address changes in these variables during the course of the funding period. The collaborations with other Safe School's programs, community agencies, and school police play a significant part in determining the success of this Goal. Communication and cooperation are essential if programs are to be effectively implemented. Shared data are also critical if this Goal is to be accurately assessed.

Most of the targeted middle and high schools have worked toward integrating existing teams into a SBT. In many cases, the facilitator serves as the chair of the SBT with the responsibility for organizing and conducting team meetings. Annual reports filed by facilitators indicate that with the exception of Bak and Dreyfoos Schools of the Arts all schools held at least monthly team meetings. Data on interventions indicates that both internal and external collaborations were in place to support student success.

In response to a series of surveys, all responding schools reported that some of their faculty members were providing referrals to the SBT. The facilitators described their teams as learning communities with shared goals focusing on students. They also reported, that diversity was viewed as a strength as was openness of team members to speak their minds. Survey results further indicated that in the first year of inception the

SBT did not have an impact on decreasing referral to ESE programs. Since this is an initiation year, it will be interesting to see if this trend can be reversed.

The evaluator attended three team meetings and noted that while each functioned differently, they were all working toward the common goal of helping students. The facilitators have made great strides in setting the groundwork to institutionalize the program. When facilitators first began working in their schools, survey findings indicated that they were somewhat unaware of the culture of their schools. However, they noted that the schools exhibited shared goals and faculty demonstrated mutual respect. These underlying traits were further demonstrated by survey data were used to explore the context of the schools prior to the implementation of the project and at the end of the first year of project implementation. Prior to the implementation of the School Based Teams, the majority of the schools were described by the facilitators as in the Contentment stage. Typically, these schools are not ready for change. At the end of the first year of implementation, facilitators indicated that the majority of the schools were in the Renewal stage. These schools are characterized by vibrant, enthusiastic, and energetic staff. Schools in this stage of readiness are willing and able to embrace change. This dramatic change in readiness for change may be due to the effective way that the facilitators developed the SBT process coupled with the mutual respect and shared goals that the facilitators sensed in their early interactions with faculty and staff.

Findings from the process section of this evaluation indicate that most of the principals have an awareness of the program and its potential in their school. The facilitators are valued, as is the work of the teams. Strength of implementation lies in the collaboration that took place in the schools as they commenced the process of merging CORE and SBT. While challenges existed in the implementation process, they were not insurmountable. Administrative support was seen as a key necessity for program success as was the support of teachers and support staff.

Excellent progress has been made toward reaching the outcomes defined in the grant application. Selected programs and safe schools practices have been identified and are being monitored to ensure that best practices are being used. Community collaborations insure that these services are available to all students. Monitoring is supported by the use of SSAASY and other district databases.

Data has been collected and reviewed to determine program impact on reading and math scores at targeted schools. Early findings indicate that participating schools have increase their scores more than district or state averages.

Data on alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use is also being monitored as are incidents of fighting and intimidation. Early findings are positive with some schools posting dramatic reductions in incidence of fighting.

Most of the targeted schools currently have functioning School Based Teams. Findings from focus groups with administrators and facilitators, as well as survey data, indicate that the targeted schools possess a culture that is ready for change and staff who will support new program implementation. While challenges in implementing these Teams were noted, none were insurmountable.

For projects to be truly successful they must be able to sustain beyond any grant funding. Project SOBEIT is no exception. Sustainability for Goal One lies in the projects ability to cement the collaborations and relationships that are being developed through grant funded activities. It also will be impacted by the successful implementation of the Electronic Cumulative Student Folder and the continued refinement and adoption of the SSAASY data. Appropriate training and support along with user friendly training and use materials will be crucial to the adoption of these technology tools.

Sustainability for Goal Two hinges on the willingness of the schools to institutionalize evidence based programs that are appropriate for their population and needs. With the myriad of programs currently in these schools and those that remain available to the schools, it is essential that decisions to continue funding these programs be based on hard data which shows improvement in the areas addressed by these interventions.

The School Based Teams developed under Goal Three have a great potential. Their sustainability depends on the willingness of the school community to change the way they have been doing business. All of the literature on systemic changes indicates that it takes five to seven years for a system as large as the Palm Beach County School District to institutionalize change. Communication, principal support, training, and resources can help solidify this process and insure successful sustainability.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, these recommendations were made to help guide the program through subsequent funding years.

Recommendation One

Within the grant application the grantee reported that, “Project SOBEIT will develop and implement a social marketing plan to educate the staff and community on behavioral and mental health issues and their impact on students’ academic achievement.” To date this has not been implemented. It is essential for program staff to begin implementing such a program. The grantor has provided technical support for this activity and has requested that all grantees “get out the good word on what is being done. Thus, it is recommended that a comprehensive Social Marketing Program be written which includes a web portal with frequently asked questions to assist SBT leaders.

Recommendation Two

It is recommended that the original program evaluation component of this grant be modified to examine the goals, objectives, and activities of the grant. It is essential that sound evaluative procedures be used to provide recommendations based on program goals.

Recommendation Three

It is recommended that the project staff revisit the idea of creating training modules which can be placed in the District’s professional development library. The outline for these training modules already exists and should be modified to expand beyond the power point design to CD/video. This will ensure sustainability and make the information generated from this grant accessible to all school and community resources.

Recommendation Four

It is recommended that a new SBT Training Manual be created and this manual should become a living document that is updated as needed. In addition, this manual should be the primary source of all SBT training.

Recommendation Five

Since not all members are regularly present at SBT meetings, it is recommended that minutes be made available to all members. Additionally, sign-in sheets and agendas should be available at all meetings.

Recommendation Six

SBT's will be rolled out in all school next year. Therefore, it is necessary to develop a rubric which measures school implementation levels.

Recommendations Seven

It is recommended that all forms and communications be dated on the bottom of the page so revisions can clearly be identified.

Recommendation Eight

It is recommended that all cases coming before the SBT be reviewed quarterly. This will allow team members and case liaisons an opportunity to close cases or review services for open cases.

Recommendation Nine

It is recommended that continuous professional development be offered to SBT members to focus on the purpose of the team, the process of team function, and alternatives to ESE placement.

Recommendation Ten

The Advisory Board should meet on a regular basis to complete the tasks described in the grant application.

Recommendation Eleven

All evidence-based programs funded either entirely or partially through SOBEIT monies should be evaluated externally or internally for fidelity of implementation and success in meeting outcomes.